

Tobacco and the Health of Young People

Fact Sheet

TOBACCO USE BY YOUNG PEOPLE

- Each day, approximately 6,000 young people try a cigarette, and 3,000 become daily smokers.¹ If current tobacco use patterns persist, an estimated 5 million people who were younger than 18 years old in 1995 will die prematurely from a smoking-related illness.²
- The proportion of high school students who smoke increased from 28% in 1991³ to 35% in 1995.⁴ In 1995, 16% of high school students were frequent smokers (i.e., had smoked cigarettes on 20 or more of the 30 preceding days).⁴
- Non-Hispanic white high school students are about twice as likely to smoke cigarettes as non-Hispanic black students (38% vs. 19%). However, the prevalence of smoking among non-Hispanic black male high school students doubled from 14% in 1991 to 28% in 1995.⁴
- Among people who have ever smoked daily, 89% tried their first cigarette and 71% began smoking daily before age 19. The average age at which smokers try their first cigarette is 14 ½ years; 25% of high school students smoked a whole cigarette before age 13.⁵
- More than 11% of high school students (20% of males and 2% of females) use smokeless tobacco.⁴ In some states, more than 1 of every 3 male high school students use smokeless tobacco.⁶
- Among high school seniors who use smokeless tobacco, almost 75% began before the 9th grade. Adolescents who use smokeless tobacco are more likely than nonusers to become cigarette smokers.⁵
- 27% of high school students report having smoked a cigar in the past year.⁷

HEALTH EFFECTS OF TOBACCO USE BY YOUNG PEOPLE

- Cigarette smoking causes heart disease; stroke; chronic lung disease; and cancers of the lung, mouth, pharynx, esophagus, and bladder.⁵
- Cigarette smoking by young people leads to serious health problems, including cough and phlegm production, an increase in the number and severity of respiratory illnesses, decreased physical fitness, adverse changes in blood cholesterol levels, and reduced rates of lung growth and function.⁵
- Use of smokeless tobacco causes cancers of the mouth, pharynx, and esophagus; gum recession; and an increased risk for heart disease and stroke.⁵
- Smoking cigars increases the risk of oral, laryngeal, esophageal, and lung cancers.⁷



NICOTINE ADDICTION AMONG ADOLESCENTS

- Several studies have found nicotine to be addictive in ways similar to heroin, cocaine, and alcohol. Because the typical tobacco user receives daily and repeated doses of nicotine, addiction is more common among tobacco users than among other drug users. Of all addictive behaviors, cigarette smoking is the one most likely to become established during adolescence.⁵
- 84% of smokers aged 12–17 consider themselves addicted. The younger people are when they start to smoke cigarettes, the more likely they are to become strongly addicted to nicotine.⁵
- Young people who try to quit smoking suffer the same nicotine withdrawal symptoms as adults who try to quit.⁵
- About 2 out of 3 teenage smokers say they want to quit;⁸ 3 out of 4 teenage smokers have made at least one serious attempt to quit smoking;⁹ and 70% say that if they could choose again, they would never start smoking.⁸
- Only 5% of high school seniors who smoke daily think they will be smoking in 5 years—but almost 75% of them are still smokers 5 years later.¹⁰

TOBACCO SALES AND PROMOTION TO YOUTH

- All states have laws making it illegal to sell cigarettes to anyone under the age of 18, yet 39% of high school students younger than 18 who smoke say they usually buy cigarettes in a store.⁴
- Among high school students younger than age 18 who smoke, 78% report not being asked for proof of age when they buy cigarettes in a store.⁴
- The tobacco industry generated about \$190 million in profit from the illegal sale of cigarettes to minors in 1991. In that year, teenagers smoked an average of 28.3 million cigarettes per day.¹¹
- About 86% of adolescent smokers who bought their own cigarettes in 1993 bought Marlboro, Camel, or Newport—the 3 most heavily advertised brands. However, these brands accounted for only 32% of all cigarettes sold that year.¹²
- In a 1991 survey, 30% of 3-year-olds and 91% of 6-year-olds recognized the Joe Camel character (the same recognition level for Mickey Mouse) and linked him to cigarettes.¹³

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